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GREAT LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

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PREFACE

Great Letters of Recommendation is the first comprehensive guide on the subject to be designed for both letter-seekers and letter-writers. Heck, we've even included advice for ghostwriters (letter-seekers who are asked to become their own letter-writers). Each of the respective chapters can be read straight through, but if you're in a hurry, browse the chapter summaries below to locate the section that addresses your specific question or concern.

Advice for Letter Seekers:

How to Get Great Letters of Recommendation

Most people think that the LOR process begins when you start narrowing down the list of professors or supervisors who might have something good to say about you. In our opinion, the real starting point involves the attitude that you bring to the process, so we start you off with a set of guiding principles that will help you approach potential recommenders strategically (**Preamble: How to Deserve a Great Letter of Recommendation**). You'll even find scripts you can use to structure those conversations. Next, we set the record straight on which types of recommenders will do your application more good than harm (**FAQ: Choosing Recommenders**). Following that are instructions on how to put together a comprehensive LOR prep package for your letter-writer, with templates and samples that you can adapt for your own use (**Assembling the LOR Prep Package**). Finally, we'll walk you through the more bureaucratic aspects of the LOR—from helping you make an educated decision about confidentiality to discussing the pros and cons of campus letter services, online credential services, and pre-professional committees (**FAQ: Waivers and Logistics**).

Advice for Recommenders:

How to Write Great Letters of Recommendation

Whether you're a veteran LOR writer with hundreds of letters under your belt or writing one for the very first time, you'll find several useful tools in this section. We start with an overview of the legal issues surrounding letters of recommendation, evaluation and reference, which includes both a review of FERPA for academic LORs and a discussion of qualified privilege for employment references (**FAQ: Legal Issues**). Next, since so many individuals have been put in the frustrating position of writing "impossible" letters, we offer some advice that should eliminate 90% of those headaches (**FAQ: Managing Borderline/Unrecommendable Recommendees**). Finally, we address the difficulty that LOR-writers face when asked to evaluate applicants for programs or disciplines that are outside of their own expertise. We surveyed graduate and professional schools about the qualities and traits that they look for in candidates; the resulting lists may provide useful clues about

the most relevant attributes to accentuate in any given LOR (**Checklists of Qualities Desired by Various Institutions and Professional Disciplines**).

Advice for Ghostwriters:

How to Draft Great Letters of Recommendation

When you approached your professor or supervisor for a LOR, you were hoping for a “Yes,” although you were also prepared to hear “No.” What you weren’t expecting was the recommender’s suggestion that you—the applicant—take a hand in drafting your own letter. If you are comfortable with this arrangement (and not everybody will be), read this chapter carefully. You’ll find a rundown of typical missteps that inexperienced LOR-writers commit (**Common Mistakes and Omissions**)—including the microscopically subtle ways in which your use of language might be sabotaging the positive tone of your letter (**Avoiding LOR Language Pitfalls**). Finally, if you’re completely at a loss as to how to start writing a LOR, we end with a couple of templates that will literally talk you, paragraph by paragraph, through the normal order of things for both academic and business recommendations (**Templates: Generic Letter of Recommendation**).

Sample Letters of Recommendation

In the second half of the book, you’ll find 40+ sample letters of recommendation for situations ranging from high school scholarships to post-graduate employment and letters of commendation for business. You may choose to flip straight to the letters whose subject matter and intended audience are closest to your own (check out the subheadings at the top left corner of the page spreads). Alternately, you can browse the samples at random to get an idea of how LORs that share the basic structure can diverge widely in formality, tone, and emphasis.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK



We surveyed a few hundred professors, asking them, “What was your worst-ever LOR experience?” The response was fantastic, so we’ve included the best of those stories—the ones most likely to inspire horrified laughter. Look for these anecdotes in the margins of the “Advice for Letter Seekers” chapter, and wherever you see this icon.



Sometimes, simply getting the answer to a Frequently Asked Question doesn’t quite do it. When people don’t like the answer, a hundred “what if...” and “but I heard somewhere that ...” objections instantly spring up. So we’ve assembled the most Frequently *Argued* Questions, with the aim of separating the true exceptions from the merely hopeful protests. Look for this FAQ icon in the margin—that’s where we’ll be doing our best to clarify the most common points of confusion that come up around LORs.

Terminology

Throughout the book, we occasionally abbreviate common phrases for the sake of brevity. LOR, of course, refers to letter of recommendation. GSI and TA stand in for graduate student instructor and teaching assistant, respectively. “Adcom” is a shortened form of admissions committee. “Referee” indicates the person who is asked to provide a work or academic reference. And FERPA, which we discuss extensively in the “Advice for Recommenders” section, is the acronym for the Family and Educational Privacy Act of 1974.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Don Osborne is the President and Founder of INQUARTA, a leading graduate school admissions advising service specializing in MBA, medical, allied health, law and other graduate programs. INQUARTA (www.inquarta.com) is the largest private graduate school advising service in the United States and has served more than 2,000 students seeking acceptance to top grad school programs. Drawing on over 20 years of advising experience, Don has developed the MBA Success system, a multidimensional approach to application strategy.

Don is a popular speaker on college campuses and has given hundreds of seminars on graduate and professional school admissions. He has twice been invited to be a workshop speaker at the International Golden Key convention of 1,200 club officers and members from all over the world.

Prior to founding INQUARTA, Don was a member of The Princeton Review faculty, the co-author of The Princeton Review MCAT Verbal course, author of the Verbal Accelerator program, and a Teacher Trainer for MCAT Verbal, LSAT, and GMAT.

Lilly Chow has over twelve years of editing experience, which includes managing content for both print journalism and Internet sites. She graduated from the University of California, Irvine, with both a bachelor’s and Master’s Degree in Comparative Literature. Subsequently, Lilly helped develop web content for Qian Yang International, a media/film production company.

Since 1999, when she began working as Managing Editor at INQUARTA’s Irvine office, Lilly has assisted more than 300 clients to articulate and express their dreams of pursuing graduate and professional education. In 2002, she opened a satellite office of INQUARTA in Northern California, where she served as Director and Head Counselor.



The real question is: What helps me decide whether or not I will write a recommendation for a student? Here are some of the ways NOT to behave if students want a professor to agree to give them a recommendation in the first place. The "rules" I state below are all based on my personal experience, sadly enough. They are unusually egregious violations of common sense. Milder versions of these violations are much more common, and are generally enough to convince me that I'd rather not inflict the student on anyone else.

How Not to Impress A Professor

- 1. Fail a course that the professor teaches by ceasing to attend class or hand in any work after midterms, and then show up a week before finals (having missed the withdrawal deadline) and ask for an Incomplete with the excuse that you were "really busy this semester."*
- 2. Show up an hour late for a midterm that lasts an hour and a half.*
- 3. Send emails to the professor with the salutation "Yo" or "Hey there."*
- 4. Copy a proposal from the Internet which the professor discovers you've plagiarized.*
- 5. Use class time to catch up on your sleep.*
- 6. Regularly show up late to class, fail to do the reading, and have no relevant answers when called on in class to participate in discussion.*
- 7. Copy the problem set of another student in the class and hand it in as your own work.*
- 8. Come to the professor and demand a higher grade because the class they teach is in the biological sciences, and biology classes are easy, so you deserve a higher grade, even if you failed to hand in the work.*
- 9. Vociferously argue that the professor is wrong about something, even after he has patiently explained it to you for the third time, and shown you relevant references in textbooks that support his argument.*
- 10. Show up two weeks after classes have begun, and explain that you didn't know when the semester started.*

*– Dr. Hillel Chiel
Case Western Reserve University*



To Whom It May Concern:

I am delighted to write on behalf of Mabel Zhang, and in support of her application for the medical program at your university. I have taught in the History Department at the University of East Great Falls for five years, and at the University of Colorado for the ten years prior. During that time, I have recommended more than 200 students for graduate study; approximately ten of those students were asking me to support their application to medical school. Of that group, I would easily categorize Mabel Zhang as the one with the most potential to succeed.

Ms. Zhang earned an A last year in my course, History 198: The Social Context of Medicine. The class enrollment was approximately 200, and the grading was based on a midterm exam, an oral presentation, and a final exam. I actually met Ms. Zhang on the first day of class, when she petitioned to enroll in the upper-division class as a sophomore. I hesitated at first, warning her that the class would require a level of academic rigor that she might not be ready for, but she explained that she was a Biology and Gender Studies double major, and that she would not have time in her schedule over the next two years to take this course (one of the few which satisfies the Gender Studies disciplinary breadth requirements) before she graduated. With a final admonition that she should be proactive about seeking help, I approved her petition—and she took my words more seriously than I could have imagined.

Ms. Zhang became a regular presence at my office hours; each time, she came prepared with a list of questions about the lecture I had just given. Her passion for the subject was ferocious, and her questions suggested a level of intellectual curiosity and critical thinking that I am more accustomed to seeing in my graduate students. Unlike most of the other science majors who find their way into my classes, Mabel approached the readings and the writing assignments with real delight.

Each student was expected to present an oral report on the history of a particular disease or epidemic; most focused their presentation on disease etiology, symptoms and relevant therapies, Mabel chose tuberculosis because she wanted to discuss not only sex-based difference but also gender differences in the incidence, diagnosis and treatment of a disease. She also—with my permission—included video footage in an irreverent yet incisive presentation that left the entire class in stitches.

As it turns out, her investigation of the influence of gender (in conjunction with but differentiated from sex difference) in pathology proved to be a fruitful line of research for her. Mabel asked so many questions about this topic that I encouraged her to pursue the answers by writing a research paper at some future point; when she asked if such an assignment could substitute for this class's midterm exam, I agreed.

I was impressed with the final paper's ambition and execution. Mabel drew a convincing analogy between historical and contemporary perceptions of migraine as a hysterical "women's disease," and was able to marshal fascinating primary sources to support her thesis. In the end, the scope was a little too big for a 15-page paper, which prompted me to assign it a grade of A-, but I encouraged her to develop the ideas further in a longer paper. I understand that she is currently expanding the paper into an honors thesis. She had asked me to serve as her independent study advisor, and I would have liked nothing more than to continue to nurture this rare intellect, but I had to decline; I would be leaving for a fellowship year in France and therefore unable to supervise her research properly. However, I referred Ms. Zhang to a colleague in the History department, who assures me that the thesis is taking shape beautifully. Mabel has promised to share the paper with me as soon as she finishes it this spring.

Mabel Zhang is a humane scientist who will succeed in any field she chooses. She had confided to me that she was drawn to both medicine and to further study in the liberal arts. I would not hesitate to recommend her for graduate study in History, but now that she has decided to make her career in medicine, I can only say that her future teachers, classmates and patients will be much the richer for it. She will be the kind of physician who understands the medical humanities in her marrow.

I feel honored to have played a part in Mabel Zhang's intellectual development, and I urge you to accept her into your medical program.

Sincerely,